

## Robert Dickson, the Indian trader /

**ROBERT DICKSON, THE INDIAN TRADER. BY ERNEST ALEXANDER CRUIKSHANK.<sup>1</sup>**

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Shortly after the close of the Revolutionary War, three brothers Dickson emigrated from Dumfriesshire, Scotland, to Canada. One of these, William, settled as a barrister at Niagara, then the chief town and centre of trade and for a few years the capital of the recently-constituted province of Upper Canada, and attained considerable local eminence in the practice of his profession. Thomas, the second brother, established himself as a merchant and forwarder of goods at Queenston, seven miles distant at the foot of the portage around the Great Falls. He too prospered and became the proprietor of many acres in the vicinity. He was soon appointed a magistrate and an officer in the militia, and in due time was promoted to be lieutenant-colonel of the Second Lincoln regiment, which he commanded during the whole of the War of 1812–15. He was wounded in the battle of Chippawa and was specially mentioned in despatches on this occasion.

The third and most adventurous of the three, Robert, the subject of this sketch, turned his attention to the western fur-trade, a calling which doubtless promised the richest rewards but was attended with extraordinary risks and hardships. The earliest mention of his name in an official document occurs in a report of Lieutenant-Governor Simcoe to 134 the Committee of the Privy Council on Trade and Plantations, dated September 1, 1794.

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"The trade to the Northwest," Simcoe remarked, "is carried on by a powerful and enterprising company. The trade from Mackinac which is the general place of deposit on Lake Huron to the Rivers which flow into the Mississippi is of the utmost importance. It would be of great advantage if a British factory could be established on the west bank of the Mississippi opposite the mouth of the Ouisconsin. The lands of the Indians might be purchased by the Crown and annual presents to the value of £500 delivered at Mackinac. The factory to have no monopoly, their advantage to result from the distribution of presents. Intercourse with Kentucky by this means might have the effect of turning their trade towards Canada."

A letter from Robert Dickson to the Hon. Robert Hamilton of Queenston, describing the usual routes of trade between Mackinac and the Mississippi, dated at Mackinac, the fourteenth of July, 1793, probably written at Simcoe's request, was enclosed.

It is not certain whether Dickson was then trading on his own account or had become a partner in the Northwest Company, but it is evident that he was already regarded as an authority on the subject and familiar with the country.

"The communication between Mackinac and the Mississippi," he stated, "is carried on by two routes, the one by Chicago, the other by the Fox and Ouisconsin rivers, the latter is preferred on account of the shortness of the carrying-place. Leaving this place, the navigation is difficult for the course lies on the north side, owing to shoals, until the Traverse at the entrance of the bay is reached. The land is poor and barren on the north side of the Lake until near LaBaye where the soil is excellent and the seasons are early. Here it has long been settled from Canada by people who sow a little grain and have about 100 cattle which run in the woods.

At the Falls of the Fox River there is a portage of three-quarters of a mile. The Indians here raise Indian corn, squash, potatoes, melons, and cucumbers in great abundance and good tobacco. On the low lands by the river great quantities of wild oats grow. In the spring

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when the water is high, canoes pass without unloading; in the middle of the carrying-place one sees the separation of the current, part of which falls into the Gulf of St. Lawrence and part into the Gulf of Mexico. The distance from the portage to the Mississippi is sixty leagues, about two leagues from where the Ouisconsin falls into the Mississippi there is a meadow of about three leagues in width called Prairie du Chien. Here a good number of families are settled. They have lately got cattle from the Illinois and begin to raise wheat."

He then proceeded to describe the settlements down the Mississippi as far as New Orleans, and the state and numbers of the Spanish garrison, apparently from personal observation, and concluded with a few remarks upon the Indians of the Northwest.

"the Ottawas or Court Oreilles," he said, "reside chiefly on the south side of Lake Michigan, they are a political and dangerous set and have much influence with the other tribes. The Chippewas or Saulteaux extend over a vast tract of country and are very numerous. No other nations are found round Lakes Superior and Huron. The Folles Avaines or Minomonees live chiefly at LaBaye. They are not numerous but are, esteemed a brave nation by the others. In autumn they generally leave LaBaye and winter on the upper parts of the Mississippi and Ouisconsin.'

About this time, Mr. Dickson seems to have served as the channel of communication between the Spanish governor of New Orleans and the British governor of Upper Canada, and in a letter of January 2, 1794, the Baron de Carondelet remarks in opening the correspondence that "being persuaded that it is to the interest of the English that the Illinois remain in the hands of Spain, he turns to him (Simcoe) for assistance."

The next twenty years of Dickson's life were spent almost without interruption in the Indian country. Those 136 were the golden days of the fur trade. The Northwest Company was at the zenith of its prosperity. When the company was originally organized in 1783, expectations of gain were so moderate that an old trader, being offered the profits of a

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single share or an annuity of 4000 livres (about \$800), chose the latter. Yet he lived to see a clear profit of more than £2,000 sterling (\$10,000) realized from three shares annually.

A fleet of fifty *canoes de maitre*, manned by a body of one thousand men, annually set out from Lachine in the spring loaded with merchandise for the distant west. Having surmounted the forty-two portages of the Ottawa and French Rivers, it usually arrived at Grand Portage or, in later years, Kaministiquia, at the head of Lake Superior, in the beginning of June, when the goods were divided among the various trading parties and furs taken on board for the return voyage. Between two and three thousand persons, all servants of the company, were assembled there for a few weeks while this was being accomplished. They then dispersed to their several trading posts, where they remained until the same time the following year.

Dickson's adventures during this period form a chapter in the "Book of Things Forgotten," which may not now be easily rewritten. Every contemporary traveller in that little-known region mentioned him. In November, 1805, Lieutenant (afterwards General) Z. M. Pike found him on the Mississippi, a hundred miles above Prairie du Chien, where he had a station and several branches.<sup>1</sup> Pike speaks of him as "a gentleman of commercial knowledge and possessing much geographical knowledge of the western country and of open, frank manners."

<sup>1</sup> Pike's *Expeditions to the Sources of the Mississippi, etc.* (Philadelphia, 1810), pp. 46 et seq.— Ed

At this time Dickson appears to have been connected in some way with the Northwest Company. His principal post was at Red Cedar Lake, but he controlled several others in charge of agents. He paid Pike much attention, which was gratefully acknowledged, and furnished him with valuable information, particularly a long and minute account of the route from Mackinac to the Mississippi by the Fox and Wisconsin rivers, which was printed in the appendix to the *Travels*.

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Everywhere along the Upper Mississippi and its tributaries, the influence of the Northwest Company was paramount. Their establishments were to be found “at every suitable place along the whole extent of Lake Superior to its head, from thence to the source of the Red River, and extending to the very center of our newly-acquired territory of Louisiana.” Its most active and influential representatives, Dickson, Aird, Cameron, Grant. and McGillis, were Scotchmen, and their substantial stockaded forts everywhere excited Pike's displeasure by flying the British flag.

“There being so many furnished posts,” he prophetically remarked, “in the case of a rupture between the powers, the English government would not furl to use them as places of deposit of arms and ammunition to be distributed to the savages who joined their arms, to the great annoyance of our territory and the loss of the lives of our citizens.” His description of the network of posts and adventurous operations of this great trading corporation fires the imagination. “They by a late purchase of the King's Posts extend their line of trade from Hudson Bay to the St. Lawrence, up that river on both sides to the Lakes; from thence to the head of Lake Superior at which place the Northwest Company have their headquarters, from thence to the source of the Red River and on all its tributary streams through the country to the Missouri; through the waters of Lake Winnipic to the Saskashawin; on that river to its source—up Elk River to the Lake of the Hills—up Peace River to the Rocky Mountains—from the Lake of the Hills up Slave River to Slave Lake; and this year have despatched a Mr. Mackenzie on a voyage of trade and discovery down Mackenzie's River to the North Sea and also a Mr. McCoy to cross the Rocky Mountains and proceed to the Western Ocean with the same objects in view. They had a gentleman named Thompson making a geographical survey of the Northwest part of the continent who for three years with an astonishing spirit of enterprise passed over all that extensive and unknown country.”

When it was found that the Grand Portage lay within the territory of the United States, the principal station of the company on Lake Superior was removed to Kaministiquia,

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where Fort William<sup>1</sup> was built, and upon the surrender of Mackinac a new route to the Mississippi was explored from Fond du Lac to the Mississippi up the St. Louis river, thence by a portage to the Savanna River, down it to Sandy Lake, and then down Sandy River.

1 See Irving's *Astoria*, chap. i.— Ed

Some years later, the traveller Bradbury met Dickson, and mentions that the fearless trader had without a single companion traversed the immense tract of almost unknown country lying between St Louis and the headwaters of the Missouri.<sup>2</sup>

2 Bradbury's *Travels in the Interior of America, in the years 1809, 1810 and 1811* (Liverpool, 1817), p. 17; *note*.— Ed

Edward A. Neill describes him, probably from local tradition, as a red-haired Scot, of strong intellect, ardently attached to the British crown, the head of the Indian trade of Minnesota, and possessing great influence among the Dakotas from having married the sister of Red Thunder, one of their bravest chiefs.<sup>3</sup>

3 Neill's *History of Minnesota* (4th ed., Minneapolis, 1882), p. 279.— Ed

Evidently he made no secret of his power and sentiments, for, as early as 1811, Ninian Edwards, governor of the Indian Territory, warned the secretary of war that “Dickson hopes to engage all the Indians in opposition to the United States by making peace between the Chippewas and Sioux and having them declare war against us.”

In August. 1811, Dickson left Amherstburg with a large supply of goods, and in spite of the efforts made to prevent him from entering the territory of the United States by the officers in command at Mackinac and Chicago, succeeded in reaching his customary trading place on the Mississippi. 139 According to his own account, preserved in the Canadian Archives, he found the agents of the United States remarkably active, making presents to the Indians and inviting their chiefs to visit Washington. He immediately took decisive

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steps to counteract their efforts. The Indians were in great distress, all their crops having failed owing to a great drouth during the summer, which also drove all the game northward from their usual hunting-grounds in quest of food. He remained there during the winter and distributed among them, without payment, his entire stock of goods, which had cost him at Montreal about \$10,000. The lives of many were preserved by this means, and the Indians became more firmly attached to him than ever. Even then their condition was deplorable, and unless supplies of goods could be introduced into the country there was a great probability that many must perish. In the spring, Dickson took his departure for Canada, promising them that he would return with further supplies. When at the portage of the Fox-Wisconsin, in the beginning of June, he met two runners bearing the following message from General Brock, the commander of the British forces in Upper Canada, with whom he had maintained some secret correspondence:

*“ Confidential communication sent by Capt. J. B. Glegg, from York, 27th February, 1812, to Mr. Dickson, residing among the Indians near the Mississippi and received by him early in June .*

“War may result from the present situation: I wish to know:—

1. The number of your friends that might be depended on;
2. Their disposition towards us;
3. Would they assemble and march under your orders;
4. State the succor you require and the most eligible mode of its conveyance;
5. Can *equipments* be procured in your *country*?
6. An immediate direct communication with you is very much required;
7. Can you point out how it can be accomplished?

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8. Send without loss of time a few *faithful* and *very confidential agents* selected from *your friends*;

9. Will individuals approach the Detroit frontier next spring? If so state time and place, we may meet.

“Avoid mentioning names in your *written communications* . I have received your *two letters* . Recollect to whom you promised to procure *shrubs* and *small frees* .”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “Chiefs and warriors,” marginal note in pencil.— Author.

*“Reply dated 18th June, 1812, and received at Fort George .*

1. The number of my friends would have been more but scarcity of provisions had reduced them to 250 or 300 of all sorts of different languages;

2. All of the same disposition as enclosed;

3. All ready to march under proper persons commissioned for the purpose;

4. An express to be sent to St. Josephs by Indians or vessels. Provisions and all sorts of proper goods required—flags, one dozen large medals with gorgets and a few small ones;

5 Equipments if timely notice is given, can be procured in the country.

6. and 7. The bearer will inform;

8. Seventy-nine of our friends left where this came from;

9. St. Josephs the general rendezvous and all our friends will be there about the 30th inst. An express to the Mississippi would be of great service.”



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Three speeches were enclosed, delivered by Wabasha and Little Crow (Sioux), and a third chief unnamed, stating that they had been amused for some time by bad birds. but that they lived by the English traders and would adhere to the English.

A chosen band of thirty Menomonees, or Folles Avoines, under the chief Weenusate, was despatched to Amherstburg without delay. This party arrived there about the 141 time that the declaration of war became known. Twenty-two of their number defeated Major Denny's force at the River Canard, and the entire band took a distinguished part in all subsequent engagements.

Dickson with one hundred and thirty warriors, Sioux, Winnebagoes, and Menomonees, reached Mackinac about the first of July. There were very few Canadians there then. On the ninth, an express arrived from General Brock announcing the declaration of war and advising an immediate attack on Mackinac. Captain Roberts instantly made a requisition on the agents of the Northwest Company, and nine days later a numerous party of their servants arrived from Fort William. In the meantime several of the principal Ottawa chiefs came in with their warriors, but when they were requested to co-operate they seemed very luke warm and indifferent. On the other hand, Dickson's Indians were eager for the attack. Amable Chevalier, an Ottawa chief from the Lake of the Two Mountains, who had come to the upper country for the purpose of hunting, exerted all his influence among his tribesmen and finally persuaded them to accompany the expedition, although he secretly informed the British officers that he was still doubtful of their fidelity.

But it was undoubtedly to the assistance rendered by Dickson's band of Indians that the easy reduction of Mackinac was due, as the decided stand they took determined the course of the other tribes. The board of inquiry appointed to report upon his claims for compensation observed that "his influence over them was conspicuous and excited surprise, especially in restraining them from outrages and preventing any conflict between them, some nations being hereditary enemies."

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Driven to an extremity by want, the Sacs applied to the commandant at Fort Madison for supplies upon credit, and being refused they followed on Dickson's path. He met them at Green Bay, loaded with the spoils of Mackinac. He selected Black Hawk as leader of the warriors of the allied nations. Placing a medal about his neck and giving 142 him a British flag, he despatched him to Detroit by way of Chicago, with five hundred followers. Black Hawk states in his autobiography that Dickson said that he "had been ordered to lay waste the country around St. Louis, but that he had been a trader on the Mississippi for many years, had always been kindly treated and could not consent to send brave men to murder women and children. There were no soldiers there to fight, but where he was going to send us there were a number of soldiers, and if we defeated them, the Mississippi country should be ours." As a matter of fact, Dickson had received no such orders, this being simply the method he adopted of turning them aside from their design of attacking the border settlements. However, Chicago and Detroit had fallen before these warriors arrived at those places, and they were obliged to return to their hunting grounds without having accomplished anything.

In November, Dickson proceeded to Montreal to solicit compensation for himself and supplies for the Indians, bearing with him a letter of introduction from Capt. Glegg in which his services were briefly stated. A board of inquiry, composed of General De Rottenburg, Sir John Johnson, and four of the leading merchants connected with the fur trade, was appointed to consider his claims and proposals, and in accordance with their recommendations he was on January 1, 1813, appointed agent for the Indians west of the Mississippi at a salary of £200 per annum, and £1,875 was allowed him as compensation for goods already distributed by him among the Indians. Amable Chevalier was appointed to accompany him as lieutenant and chief interpreter, and he was permitted to select a staff of four other officers and fifteen interpreters. Green Bay and Chicago were selected as places of rendezvous and deposit for goods. His letter of instructions said: "The policy to be strictly observed in your conduct towards the different tribes should be to endeavor to conciliate them to act harmoniously, that you should restrain them by all means in your

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power from acts of cruelty and inhumanity, and encourage 143 in them a disposition to form an alliance with their great father the king of England. That they should insist on all Americans, whether in arms or otherwise, that they retire behind the boundary line fixed by Wayne's treaty, and that no Americans can be allowed, to remain on their side of the line without the risk of being treated as enemies except when they have been granted lands by treaties with the Indians, and it is to be clearly understood that the Indians only are to appear as movers in such proceedings." He was provided with six silk flags and five large medals with gorgets, to be given to the principal chief of each nation. He estimated that he would be able to bring at least one thousand warriors into the field, but that the period of action would be extremely limited, lasting only from the opening of navigation until about the beginning of August, when they would be obliged to prepare to return to their wintering grounds in the Northwest. All his proposals were actually adopted except one, which was to enlist a body of one or two hundred Englishmen and Canadians, then in the Indian country, to act as rangers in conjunction with the Indians.

Dickson certainly wasted little time in preparations for his mission. On the eighteenth of January he wrote to Capt. Noah Freer, Sir George Prevost's military secretary, that he would set out for the West on the following day. On the fifteenth of February he addressed a letter from Sandwich to the governor-general himself, informing him that he had arrived at Niagara on the fourth, and immediately proceeded onward towards Amherstburg in company with Capt John Norton, the well-known Mohawk chief, whom he met by appointment at the Grand River. On his way thither he had encountered a courier from General Proctor announcing the approach of General Harrison's army, and formed a select party of the Grand River Indians to follow him to Detroit, sending at the same time paroles to other tribes requiring them to assemble for the defence of that place with all possible haste. He announced his intention of departing for Chicago on the twenty-second of February, 144 and stated his intention of stationing canoes at different points along his route to forward despatches from Generals Proctor and Sheaffe.<sup>1</sup> Already since the battle

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at the River Raisin, many Indians had arrived at Proctor's headquarters, but disquieting intelligence soon came in from the West.

1 Sir Roger Hale Sheaffe, major-general in the British army. For Proctor, see *ante*, p. 108, note 2.— Ed

Early in February, Captain Roberts, the commandant at Mackinac, had received a letter from Joseph Porlier and other residents of Prairie du Chien stating that there were two hundred British subjects at that place and five thousand Indians in the neighborhood, and asking him for supplies to save them from starvation. They enclosed a letter received by the Indians from Nicholas Boilvin, the American Indian Agent at Prairie du Chien. announcing the approach of a large American force and requiring them to join the United States without delay, threatening them with war without mercy in the event of their refusal. An urgent message from Wabasha (La Feuille) was forwarded at the same time, in which he said: "As a cloud is approaching over the heads of the children whom thou hast put under my care, and the Americans mean to take possession of this piece of land, I would wish to clear it but I want help. The white s send you news. I have talked with the Sacs, Outagamies and Winnebagoes and we have all but one heart."

Dickson was detained at Detroit, probably from delay in the forwarding of Indian goods, until the fourth of March. His next letter was dated at St. Josephs On the sixteenth of that month. Since his arrival there he had held a council with the Pottawatomies of that place, who had agreed to join the Shawnees, Kickapoos and Delawares and proceed to Detroit. He found that the Americans had burnt the village of Peoria and deported the French inhabitants to St. Louis and destroyed all the cornfields of the Indians in its vicinity. This obliged him to make arrangements for supplying them with food. On the twenty-second he wrote to General Sheaffe from Chicago informing him that the Indians of the Wabash were marching on Detroit, and that 145 he had discovered two small brass cannons belonging to the former garrison of that place, which he would send to Mackinac. The next day he plunged into the unknown country beyond, and disappeared from sight for

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nearly three months. McAfee states that he visited during that time all the tribes on the Illinois and Mississippi, from Green Bay to Prairie du Chien, and held a great council at Chicago in June, which was attended by a thousand warriors. "He proved his loyalty and deserved well of his employers by his great zeal, industry, and address in this service," is his comment.

One body of Indians despatched by him and led by Black Hawk arrived at Detroit in time to take part in the first siege of Fort Meigs, but no direct message from Dickson himself was received until he actually emerged again from the wilderness. General Proctor's correspondence contains several references to this prolonged and mysterious silence, and as late as the nineteenth of June he expresses much anxiety for his fate. In the meantime John Askin, Robert Livingston, and others were busy on the north shore of Lakes Huron and Superior in a similar way. On the third of June, Askin wrote to Colonel Claus, the deputy-superintendent at Niagara, that Dickson had not arrived nor had any intelligence been received from him, but that he would find canoes prepared for him when he came. Askin was then employed in sending off Indians to Detroit as fast as they arrived at Mackinac. Two hundred Ottawas had already gone and other parties were leaving every day. The Missassaugas and La Cloche Indians had been despatched by him to Niagara early in the spring. The Lake Superior Indians were daily expected. "Every Indian," he remarked, "that can bear arms on Lake Michigan and Huron, from Saginaw Bay to Matchedash, will exert himself to drive away the Americans."

Others, however, took a much less sanguine view of their disposition. Lieut-Colonel De Boucherville, who visited Mackinac and other western posts on a confidential mission toward the close of May, informed Prevost that "the confidence 10 146 to be placed in the Indians is very precarious; the least failure dismays them." Dickson had not been heard from since the twenty-second of March. The Indians upon the upper Mississippi had been at war with each other during the autumn, and it was reported that General Clark was about to ascend the river with two thousand men to attack them in their villages. Half of the Sacs had already joined the Americans before Dickson arrived. Early in the spring,

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Captain Roberts had sent several boats loaded with provisions and stores for him to Green Bay, but had heard nothing from them since their departure.

Proctor had already more Indians hanging upon him than he could feed. They brought their families with them, and were unemployed and half-starved. Proctor said that if they had not been “very warm in the cause” they would have deserted him. He made a feeble attempt to relieve the strain on his supplies, by sending about two hundred of them to join General Vincent on the Niagara.

On the tenth of June, Dickson finally arrived at Mackinac, bringing with him more than six hundred chosen warriors.<sup>1</sup> Eight hundred more had been despatched by land from Chicago to Detroit. This force must have comprised nearly the entire fighting strength of the tribes residing in the present states of Illinois and Wisconsin, besides many from beyond the Mississippi. The causes of his prolonged absence are nowhere explicitly stated. At Mackinac he was detained for two weeks by foul weather and consequently did not arrive at Detroit until the second week in July. Scarcely a month then remained for action, before the date fixed for the return of these Indians to their homes. The accession of this following really added to Proctor's embarrassments. His regular force did not exceed five hundred men. He dared not summon the Canadian militia from the task of securing their harvests, upon which the future success of his operations so greatly depended.

1 Chippewas, 116; Menomonees, 920; Ottawas, 49; Sioux, 97; Foxes and Renards, 18; Winnebagoes or Puants, 130.— Author.

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The month passed away in enforced idleness, and still the promised reinforcement of regulars did not arrive. By that time the Indian warriors assembled at Detroit, almost three thousand in number, were on the brink of starvation. Early in August, Proctor was actually forced by their necessities, against his better judgment, to undertake a forward

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movement in the hope of supplying them at his opponent's expense. He soon found that his operations would be regulated by their "caprices and prejudices," as the regular force he took with him numbered only about one-tenth of the whole. For a few days after Dickson's arrival, his Indians proved "restrainable and tractable to an unexpected degree, but were afterwards contaminated," and became as lawless as the others. Accordingly, after having invested Fort Meigs for a few days, they began to desert and return to Detroit in such numbers that when the blockade was abandoned only about two hundred of Elltott's and a few of Dickson's Indians remained. Proctor then moved against Fort Stephenson, where he met with a bloody repulse. The Indians offered on this occasion to storm one face of the fort while the British troops assailed the other, but they had scarcely come within range of the fire of the besieged before they ran away in dismay. This disastrous experience convinced the British general that the Indian force is "seldom a disposable one and never to be relied on in time of need."

Although his levies had proved of little service, Proctor spoke officially of their energetic leader as, "Mr. Robert Dickson, to whose zeal and ability, which from circumstances have not had full scope, I must offer full testimony," and despatched him on a confidential mission to the governor-general, whose headquarters were then at Kingston.

Black Hawk and many of the western warriors returned home within a few days, being tired of the service and anxious to make the most of the approaching hunting-season, but a great number still remained. The total number of mouths to be fed actually numbered about five times 148 the fighting strength. The depredations and ravages they committed were indescribable. They had become a source of weakness rather than strength. On the sixth of August the deputy-commissary at Amherstburg wrote as follows to Edward Couche, the commissary-general for the province of Upper Canada: "If the Indians remain and continue their wanton and extensive depredations on cattle, a short period will put an end to our supplies. I have accounts amounting to £2,000 for working oxen, milch cows, sheep, and hogs killed by them, and expect accounts for as much more. Some of these have been killed without any meat having been taken from them; in other instances the

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horns and tails were cut off and the carcasses left to the dogs. I could easily have supplied provisions for 2,000 troops in conformity with your letter of the 18th of July. Since then I have been feeding 15,000 troops, Indians, &c. I find such difficulty in procuring flour, corn, etc. to feed such hordes of savages and money to pay for it that I have more than I can do.”

At this time no less than fourteen thousand rations were daily issued to the Indians and their families alone, and there remained flour in store sufficient only to last fourteen days at that rate of consumption. When at length General Proctor determined to retreat, the Pottawattomies, Miamies, Chippewas, and part of the Ottawas deserted him and recrossed the Detroit. Some of these tribes immediately made peace with the United States and agreed to strike the British. Two officers of the Indian department, Chadronet and Kinzie, were apprehended in a treasonable correspondence. No Wisconsin Indians accompanied the British force, and Dickson himself went westward about the time of its departure from Amherstburg. On the fourteenth of September he was at Niagara, on the twenty-sixth at Kingston, and on the twenty. second of October he again arrived at Mackinac, having returned by the way of York and Matchedash after a stormy voyage of twenty days on Lake Huron. The “Nancy,” a vessel belonging to the Northwest Company, which had been sent down for supplies, had come in the 149 day before without any, having been attacked in the River St. Clair by a party of Michigan militia, and bringing information of Proctor's disastrous defeat. The garrison of the place had only sixty-eight pounds of salt pork, and flour for one month, in store, and Capt. Bullock, who had succeeded Roberts in command, at once sent an agent to Green Bay and other neighboring settlements to purchase all the provisions he could find. In this service he was materially assisted by Dickson and his lieutenants, Louis Grignon and John Lawe. In a short time sufficient supplies were procured to maintain the garrison until the following February.<sup>1</sup>



1 See correspondence between Dickson, Lawe and Grignon, in *Wis. Hist. Coll.*, xi., pp. 274 *et seq.*— Ed.

On October 23rd, Dickson informed Capt. Freer that he found on his arrival that Mr. McKay had everything in readiness for his departure for the Mississippi, where he would probably remain all winter.<sup>2</sup> He received an ample and excellent assortment of Indian goods. On the same day Bullock wrote that he had detached one subaltern, one sergeant, and twenty-six rank and file in six boats, with Mr. Dickson, to establish a post at La Baye, eighty leagues away. On the thirteenth of November, Dickson was at Lake Winnebago, where he appears to have remained with little interruption until the following April.<sup>3</sup>

2 See *ante*, p. 111.— Ed.

3 *Wis. Hist. Coll.*, xi., p. 276.— Ed.

His approach had not remained unheralded. During the summer, rumors were current at St. Louis of his intention to return to the Mississippi with cannon, and that he had promised to lead the Indians against that frontier the next summer, and “long quarters in Fort Madison.” Much alarm prevailed in consequence, and General Howard advanced with about a thousand men to Peoria, where he built a fort to overawe the neighboring tribes.<sup>4</sup> The British traders on the Illinois and the south shore of Lake Michigan were seized and imprisoned. The Pottawattomies had long been

4 *Ibid.*, p. 263, note.— Ed.

150 suspected by Dickson, and their hostility to the British now became open and avowed. His instructions to his officers during his absence had been simply to keep the Indians quiet, and he apparently experienced much difficulty during the winter in regaining his lost influence over some of the tribes. The Menomonees and Winnebagoes, however, were as warmly attached to him as ever, and formed a sort of body-guard upon which he could securely depend. The letters printed in volumes x. and xi. of the *Wisconsin*

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*Historical Collections* show that for some time he was in serious apprehension of an attack from the Pottawatomies. The old feud between the Chippewas and the Sioux burst once more into open hostilities and bloodshed. Numbers of the Indians near the Mississippi had already made their peace with the Americans, and those who still remained faithful to their compact with him were destitute and starving. For some time he himself seems to have been in actual fear of perishing from hunger. His correspondence in the midst of these dangers and difficulties shows no sign of despondence and he continued to predict that they would have good news when the Montreal express came in. The good news did not reach him until the twentieth of March, but then it must have exceeded his utmost expectations, for the gazettes sent him contained information of the surprise of Fort Niagara and the destruction of Buffalo, of the battle of Chrysler's Farm, of the signal defeat of Napoleon at Dresden, and of the capture of the fortress of Pampeluna and San Sebastian by the Duke of Wellington. At the same time he learned that a reinforcement for the garrison of Mackinac was on its way, but that an expedition against that post was said to be fitting out at Detroit. Accordingly he began to collect the Menomonees and Winnebagoes for its relief, rather regretting at the same time that this prevented him from attempting a dash at St. Louis. During the last week in April he made a flying visit to Prairie du Chien, and then immediately proceeded to Mackinac with all the Indians he could muster.

Early in December, 1813, a detachment from Detroit had 151 advanced on St. Joseph's, made prisoners six employees of the Northwest Company, and destroyed the storehouses. In reporting this event to Governor Edwards, Col. Butler remarked that he had learned that Dickson had gone to Green Bay the autumn before, with five boats loaded with goods for the Indians. He had then ascended the Fox River as far as practicable, when the merchandise was landed and loaded upon pack-horses, and he had proceeded into the interior, exciting the Menomonees and Winnebagoes to make war. Agents had been sent by him to the Kickapoos with promises that the Sacs and Sioux

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would unite with them. "He is said to possess as much influence over the Winnebagoes as he does over the Sioux."

A few weeks after, Edwards writes that the Indians had recommenced hostilities, and affirms his belief that Dickson was preparing for a descent on St. Louis. As late as the fourteenth of May, 1814, *Niles' Register* mentions that great alarm prevailed at that place in apprehension of an attack by him. The same newspaper published a list of persons residing in the western parts of the United States who had joined the British. This contained the names. of Robert Dickson, James Aird, Duncan Graham, Francis Boutellier, Edward La Guthrie and Michael Brisbois of Prairie du Chien; Jacob Franks and the brothers Grignon of Green Bay, Joseph La Croix and — Le Sellier of Milwaukee, Joseph Bailly and his cousin — Benoit of St. Joseph's, Michael La Croix, Louis Buisson, and Louis Benet of Peoria.

During the winter, delegates from several western nations visited Quebec and were warmly welcomed by Sir George Prevost. The Sioux were represented by Wabasha and Little Crow, the Menomonees by Tomah, and the Winnebagoes by Lassammic. Wabasha said: "We have the good fortune to have the Red Head [Dickson] for a friend, who in spite of the barriers which the Americans have made, always found a passage to come and save the Indians from perishing;" and Tomah spoke of Dickson's "courage and good heart which made him proceed in spite of the lateness of the season and its severity, and arrive with the 152 goods destined for us, which saved our lives as well as many other nations."

In May, Fort Gratiot was built and garrisoned for the purpose of overawing the Indians of Michigan and cutting off all communication betwixt them and the garrison of Mackinac, and an expedition from St. Louis under Governor Clark ascended the Mississippi and took possession of Prairie du Chien. Capt. Francis Michael Dease, who held the place for Dickson, with a few men of the Michigan Fencibles, retired on its approach without firing a shot, and the Sacs sued for peace. Dickson had set out for Mackinac three weeks before,

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taking with him eighty-five Winnebagoes, one hundred and twenty Menomonees, and one hundred Sioux.

On the eighteenth of May, Lieut. Colonel Robert McDouall arrived at Mackinac with two weak companies of the Royal Newfoundland, ten artillerymen, and a few sailors, and assumed command of the garrison. Dickson soon after came in with two hundred Indians and established his headquarters there as "Agent and Superintendent of the Indians on the Mississippi" Tidings of the capture of Prairie du Chien soon reached them, accompanied by most urgent appeals for support from the Indians in its vicinity, and within a week a small but well-equipped expedition was sent off under Lieut.-Colonel McKay, a partner in the Northwest Company, for its recovery. About one-half of the Indians assembled on the island were detached by Dickson on this service, and when the American squadron finally hove in sight only a hundred and forty remained to share in its defense. In the operations which resulted in the repulse of Colonel Croghan's expedition, he took a distinguished part, and the assault of a band of Menomonees led by Tomah under Dickson's direction, decided the fate of the day. On the third of September following, he participated in the successful attack upon the schooner "Tigress" by a division of boats despatched from the island under Lieutenant Worsley. The last event terminated the blockade of the island, which had continued for more than a month, and virtually concluded the war in that quarter.

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In the autumn, Dickson again proceeded to Prairie du Chien and spent the winter in the vicinity, organizing the Indians for the defense of that place and a prospective attempt upon St. Louis. In the spring of 1815 he returned to Mackinac, but soon after his arrival quarreled with Colonel McDouall, who arbitrarily superseded him in his employment and dismissed him from the service.

After the conclusion of peace he continued to trade in the Northwest for some years longer. In 1823, however, his family was enumerated as residing in the township of

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Willoughby near the present village of Chippawa, Ontario. He is said to have returned soon afterwards to Scotland, where he ended his days.